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ABSTRACT

To investigate the impact of P.L. 94-142 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act) on urban and rural local education agencies, surveys were completed by 17 urban and 19 rural administrators in Missouri. The open-ended instrument included five topics: level of P.L. 94-142 impact on the school district; type of impact; problems confronting the district that hinder compliance with P.L. 94-142; areas of major educational concern; and local, state, and federal economic factors hindering compliance. Among findings were the following: (1) that the impact of P.L. 94-142 was viewed as moderated by antecedent state legislation; (2) that drawbacks included increased paperwork and time requirements; and (3) that problems hindering compliance ranged from transportation and insufficient funding to lowered student enrollment. Recommendations addressed fiscal, adminisrative, and educational policy areas. (CL)

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Impact of P.L. 94-142 on Local Education Agencies: Administrators' Responses

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of Public Law 94-142 on urban and rural local education agencies as reported by superintendents and administrators of special education in a mid-western state. The following five topics were addressed in the survey: (a) level of impact of P.L. 94-142 on the school district, (b) type of impact of the legislation, (c) problems confronting the district hindering compliance with P.L. 94-142, (d) areas of major educational concern imposing on the district, and (e) local, state, and federal economic factors interfering in compliance with P.L. 94-142. Recommendations and suggestions for further study are included.

Impact of P.L. 94-142 on Local Education Agencies:
Administrators' Responses

Within the past decade has emerged a significant awareness by society toward the field of special education and its relationship to serving exceptional children in the public school system. Through the processes of case law, public awareness, ar. state and federal legislation, special education has been brought to the forefront within the educational domain. All of these efforts culminated with Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The broad, encompassing features of the federal mandate have generated much interest, controversy, and confusion by both educators and administrators. At the same time, there are limited evidence of administrative perceptions regarding the impact of the legislation on the individual school district.

Implementation of P.L. 94-142 has had a profound effect on the global sphere of education leaving almost no one isolated from its influence. Instead the educational policy has imposed tremendous ramifications for serving handicapped children in public, private, and residential sectors. This pervasive nature merited recognition early on as the "Bill of Rights for the Handicapped" (Goodman, 1976) which is academically indicative of the legislative significance.

Though the earlier crisis within special education was appropriately titled "the Quiet Revolution" (Diamond, 1973), it has resulted in legislation with far reaching implications. The legislative conquest of the revolution brought about a public policy that provides an affirmative right to an appropriate education for all handicapped students (Abeson & Zettel, 1977). With the passage of P.L. 94-142, public policy was expressed regarding the educational philosophy to be maintained toward the

handicapped population with priority for the inadequately served and unserved. Federal, state, and local education agencies are directly involved in the administration of the varied components mandated in the public policy. Yet in the formulation of rules and regulations, guidelines, and bylaws at the federal and state level, directives now serve to ensure greater responsible action by state and local agencies to meet the intent of the public policy (Abeson & Zettel, 1977).

While state education agencies (SEAs) monitor local education agencies (LEAs) to ensure full compliance, it is the local district that assumes the primary role for implementation. Congress felt that the local school district could best provide special education services to the vast majority of handicapped students. But how are administrators at the local level handling the complex federal law? What is its impact on the individual school district? Does it affect rural or urban school districts in a different manner? What are administrators' attitudes and opinions toward Public Law 94-142?

These and other questions form a model of the survey that addresses administrative perceptions of the impact of the federal mandate on the local education agency. In the First Annual Report to Congress regarding P.L. 94-142, "it was discovered that the need for basic information far exceeded the need for evaluative judgements. The information needs of people concerned with implementation of P.L. 94-142 are enormous" (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979, p. 146). It is toward this end that this study attempts to provide a partial response. Implications from the survey findings invariably will affect educational policy to some degree at the local school district level.

METHOD

Respondents

The respondents to the survey were 36 local education agencies' superintendents and administrators of special education programs in Missouri. Fifty school districts were randomly selected to form two unique groups of urban and rural distinction. Twenty-five public school districts that maintained an average daily attendance (ADA) of 5000 and above comprised the urban group with 25 districts maintaining an ADA of 800 and below forming the rural group. The enrollment cutoff points of 5000 and 800 are arbitrary but are assumed to connote relatively urban and rural local education agency composition for Missouri. Seventeen urban and 19 rural administrators, or 72 percent, of the 50 public school districts in the sample responded.

Although there were other questions addressing the impact of Public Law 94-142 on the local education agency, only the results of five questions were necessary for the purpose of this study. The open-ended survey instrument included the following five topics: (a) level of impact of P.L. 94-142 on the school district, (b) type of impact of the legislation, (c) problems confronting the district hindering compliance with P.L. 94-142, (d) areas of major educational concern imposing on the district, and (e) local, state, and federal economic factors interfering in compliance with P.L. 94-142.

RESULTS

For the purpose of this study, the responses were grouped into appropriate generalized categories. The respondents, in some cases, did not provide specific responses which accounts for participation less than

100% on the questions. A question by question format presents the data in Table 1. It can be seen from this table that varied responses were generated. While some responses may be idiosyncratic to the individual school district, most are representative of the current state of affairs presented in the dialogue of administrators and educators.

TABLE 1

Responses to Survey Instrument

QUESTION 1:	What was the level of impact of P.L. 94-142 on the provision of an appropriate education for handicapped students in your school district? (35 respondents)		
	High 15	Urban (10)	Rural (5)
	Medium 16	Urban (6)	Rural (10)
	Low 4	Urban (1)	Rural (3)
QUESTION 2:	What impact has P.L. 94-142 made on your school district in the provision of special education programs and related services to handicapped students? (35 respondents)		
Expansion of programming efforts	21	Urban (7)	Rural (14)
Increased handicapped enrollment	2	Urban (2)	
Diagnostic procedures revised	2	Urban (2)	
Greater awareness of handicapped rights	1	Urban (1)	
Minimal impact due to House Bill 474	3	Urban (2)	Rural (1)
Increased paperwork/time commitment	3	Urban (3)	
Individualized education program	3	Urban (1)	Rural (2)
Transportation/physical space problems	3		Rural (3)
QUESTION 3:	What problems hinder your school district from being in full compliance with the mandate of P.L. 94-142? (33 respondents)		
Insufficient funding	9	Urban (6)	Rural (3)
Recruiting qualified staff	6	Urban (1)	Rural (5)
Equivocal interpretations of mandates	1	Urban (1)	
Physical space problems	2		Rural (2)
Scheduling problems	1		Rural (1)
Lack of public agencies	1		Rural (1)
Student enrollment limitations	1		Rural (1)
Excessive paperwork	1		Rural (1)
No problems	11	Urban (6)	Rural (5)

QUESTION 4: What are the major educational concerns imposing on your school district in relation to the overall mandate of P.L. 94-142? (32 respondents)

Interpretation of related services	1	Urban (1)	
Disproportionate educational emphasis	2		Rural (2)
Severely handicapped provision	2	Urban (2)	
Need for gifted programming	1		Rural (1)
Least restrictive environment	1	Urban (1)	
Total mainstreaming	1		Rural (1)
Due process interpretation	1	Urban (1)	
Difficulty of placement	1		Rural (1)
No areas of major concern	22	Urban (8)	Rural (14)

QUESTION 5: What local, state, or national economic factors have interfered with, or potentially may interfere, in achieving compliance with the mandate of P.L. 94-142 in providing an appropriate education to handicapped students? (31 respondents)

Insufficient funding	18	Urban (8)	Rural (10)
Inflation/Recession	3	Urban (3)	
Severly handicapped programming	2	Urban (2)	
Parochial school attendance	1		Rural (1)
Inclusive definition of learning disability	1	Urban (1)	
Specific state legislation	1	Urban (1)	
Student enrollment limitations	1		Rural (1)
No interfering factors	4		Rural (4)

DISCUSSION

Impact of Public Law 94-142 has unquestionably attributed to the expansion of special education programming within the local education agency. This occurred primarily through the funding principle which allowed districts to acquire essential equipment and materials, provide more professional services, and hire additional qualified personnel. Federal sources appear to play an important role with rural districts being particularly influenced. Unsatisfactory programming for handicapped children may be the rule rather than the exception without it. Certainly the funding authorizations, in addition to the outright mandate, afforded a powerful incentive for many districts to be in compliance. It is in

agreement with this position that Gearheart (1980) concluded "if PL 94-142 is funded and implemented as designed, it is undoubtedly the greatest single event of the century in the history of education of the handicapped" (p. 48). Unfortunately, appropriations from Congress continue to be a restrictive factor that may limit a district's special education efforts as a whole. Recession and inflation have exacted their toll as well on the provision of services. Each economic factor contributes in part to reducing the quality of special education programs whether they occur in urban or rural areas.

From a different perspective, the impact of P.L. 94-142 was perceived as being moderated somewhat by specific antecedent legislation of Missouri House Bill 474, the special education act of 1974. It was reported as having greater impact on several local school districts because it mandated services similar to the requirements of the federal legislation. From 1970 to 1975, numerous states including Missouri enacted legislation that required provision of educational services for all handicapped children. Some form of similar mandatory legislation existed in all but two states by 1975 (U.S. Senate, Report No. 94-168, 1975). One of the most enlightening pronouncements exists in the observation that 37 of the 48 states had adopted their current special education legislation since 1970 (Zettel & Weintraub, 1978). Perhaps some school districts were already in compliance with certain features of P.L. 94-142 because of the antecedent state legislation.

As with many beneficial programs, certain drawbacks often do accompany the process. One drawback oriented about the increased amount of paperwork and time commitment involved in procedural compliance with the federal legislation. While no one will deny that this has occurred, the degree of imposition varies. One basic requirement related to this concern is the individualized education program (IEP), but it generally is regarded as educationally beneficial for the participants involved. While each handicapped student must have an IEP developed relative to his/her unique special educational needs, it is possible for certain benefits to be derived by personnel. In a study by the National Education Association (1978), teachers were found to benefit from the written agreement. Essentially, the IEP provided a means to bargain with appropriate school officials for acquisition of materials, equipment, and resources to fulfill the outlined goals and objectives. Perhaps a more favorable attitude would be generated if the amount of paperwork and time commitment could be reduced without sacrifice of educational, administrative, and technical information.

Optimism toward the mandate of Public Law 94-142 and its impact on the local education agency is tempered somewhat by problems that hamper efforts of being in compliance. Transportation, limited physical space, recruiting qualified staff, insufficient funding, and even lowered student enrollment interact to impact on programming for handicapped children. Transportation problems are often common in the school district where rough terrain, long distances, and sparse population exist. Finding qualified personnel to provide essential services in rural areas also is

particularly troublesome. Urban (1972) concluded early on that "staffing special education programs in rural areas is another research problem that has received too little attention" (p. 12). Suggestions for alleviation of this situation by Urban (1972) include providing scholarships for professional preparation in the field of special education to be exchanged for two or three years service in rural areas. While this financial reimbursement plan has worked in relation to preparation of physicians, it remains to be seen as to the effect derived for preparation of special education personnel. Certainly these problems (especially financial limitations) are not unique only to rural or small school districts. Instead they are of concern to all educational agencies confronted by the many challenges of P.L. 94-142. Yet, on a proportional basis, the impact may be greater for the smaller school district.

While funding insufficiency at all three levels of government were commonly noted by both urban and rural administrators, a study by Helge (1980) of the National Rural Project did not report a single occasion when state education agencies (SEAs) viewed inadequate funding as a problem. The local education agencies (LEAs) contrastingly described their foremost problems in providing an appropriate education to handicapped students as (a) transportation inadequacies, (b) recruitment/retention of qualified personnel, (c) funding inadequacies, (d) problems providing support services, (e) geographic insolation, and (f) lack of proper facilities. All of these problems were paramount within the urban and rural local education agencies in this study as well. Since cognizance of problems is

the initial step toward problem solving, it was clearly the intent of these administrators to enhance special education programming at the local school district level through this approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings in this study, a number of specific and general recommendations warrant consideration by state and local education agencies. The recommendations which follow address several of the problem areas influencing fiscal, administrative, and educational policy.

1. State education agencies should establish a centralized communication network to collect, coordinate, and disseminate information relative to local education agencies' specific personnel needs. Potential job applicants could then obtain employment information as well as make their availability and qualifications known.

2. Local education agencies should be more intent in seeking external funding sources, other than traditional means, in order to continue special education programming at present levels.

3. Local education agencies should investigate the feasibility of establishing local or regional cooperatives to augment their ability to procure essential supplies, equipment, and technical and professional services.

4. State education agencies should consider providing seminars to LEA administrators for uniform acquaintance with educational policy relative to Public Law 94-142.

Application of this pragmatic element will perhaps serve to enhance implementation efforts of the legislation at the local level.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Upon examination of the data presented in this study relative to the impact of P.L. 94-142 on the local education agency, a series of additional questions were generated which merit further study. The following questions should be addressed to understand more fully the implications of the mandate on a broader scope.

1. Will compliance with the overall mandate of Public Law 94-142 be fulfilled to the current extent if local, state, or federal funding is reduced?

2. If studies similar to the present one were conducted in other regions of the nation, would there be regional differences due to educational, legal, social, or political variations?

3. What would the effect be on overall special education programming if the paperwork dimension (i.e., clerical duties as opposed to teaching) was alleviated for school districts?

4. Would greater state administration of special education programs be a feasible alternative to the federal role imposed today?

These questions are only a few among many that could be addressed to facilitate understanding as well as implementation of the complexity of the federal mandate. Many challenges remain yet to be conquered, but each accomplishment is effective toward better special educational programming for handicapped students.

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